

Congressional Hearing on Hurricane Isabel  
10/10/03  
Testimony of Chief Gregory B. Cade, Virginia Beach Fire Department

***Good morning Ladies and Gentlemen:***

We were quite fortunate that the speed and intensity of Hurricane Isabel dropped from a Category 5 storm to just barely reaching a Category I Hurricane when it hit landfall and grazed Virginia Beach.

Although not anticipating the grand scale of power outages, and damage from falling debris, overall I feel Virginia Beach fared quite well. This is due to the quick emergency presidential declaration that made funding available for public safety issues and debris removal, as well as the effective execution of our Emergency Operation Plan.

Hurricane Isabel has taught us many lessons. Lessons that helped us identify some of our weaknesses. We are going to use those lessons with the help and guidance of FEMA, Federal legislators and the State in evaluating the overall effectiveness. This should lead to improved planning, training, equipment and financial support so we will be better prepared for the next emergency. We will then be able to provide a more efficient response, recovery and quality service to our citizenry.

It became quite apparent early on in the storm that a major problem was developing with 320 of 360 sewer pump stations shutting down due to loss of power. We knew this would have an impact on the health and environment of our community. Our need to obtain generators to get vital pump stations up and running was of utmost urgency. Although we understand the need for checks and balances, the request and delivery of these generators did not go as well or as quickly as we had hoped for. We feel there needs to be a more efficient way of recognizing, planning, analyzing and processing emergency requests.

The expectations from FEMA in setting up the individual assistance processes would have been helpful. As an example, the need for a 2500 square foot donated space to set up the Disaster Assistance Center could have been discussed ahead of time. The City does not have that kind of vacant space available without disrupting on going city services. Finding rental space that meet the needs of FEMA took several days adding to the frustration of our citizens.

In addition, we need an improved process dealing with human services such as mass care and how these services interact from the Federal to Local level. The efficiency of dealing with distribution of ice, water and

food stamps indicates that additional work needs to be done so a more coordinated effort by Federal, State and City agencies can be achieved. We understand the FEMA model of using paraprofessionals for crisis counseling. However, FEMA's funding requirements for crisis counseling grants, which include a short time span for turning in these applications, is not practical from the local level and needs to be reviewed.

The twice a day briefings and status reports were helpful to understand the depth of the problems facing our region. It would be beneficial for the future to be able to have smaller conference capability between adjacent jurisdictions to coordinate response and recovery issues.

To help ensure that issues like this are handled more efficiently and effectively, the city needs feedback from the State and FEMA on how logistical requests were analyzed and guidance on how we can help to improve the process in the future when we make requests, to ensure compliance thereby expediting recovery efforts.

In conclusion, the overall response by FEMA and the State to the city's needs have been positive. However, further exercises, training and planning to support the logistical function in a major emergency is needed to

increase efficiency of the system. This way we ensure we have an immediate and positive impact on service needs provided to the citizenry.

Thank you.

Gregory B. Cade

Fire Chief